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ABSTRACT

This study examines the importance of structured reflection in service-learning courses. The study consisted of interviews with 15 faculty and 72 students from three different higher education institutions; interviews were conducted between October 1998 and March 1999. Focus group interviews with faculty gathered information about course design, classroom practices, and faculty perceptions of student learning. Student interviews focused on how students interpreted the service experience in relation to the course, that is, the connections between academic course material and the community work/service experience; the role reflection played in the course and in their personal and academic development; and the things they did in and out of class to help connect the service experience and the formal course content. The study found that it is essential to provide structured, intentional reflection in service-learning courses, and that reflection enhances learning by connecting the service experience to the academic course. (Contains 36 references.) (CH)

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# How Reflection Enhances Learning in Service-Learning Courses

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**How Reflection Enhances Learning in Service-Learning Courses**


***Abstract***

By exploring the service-learning experiences of 15 faculty and 72 students, this study helps to fill a void in the service-learning research literature to date: ***empirical evidence*** of the importance of structured reflection in service-learning courses. This article presents two important findings about the role of reflection in service-learning courses: 1) it is essential to provide ***structured, intentional*** reflection in service-learning courses, and 2) reflection enhances learning by connecting the service experience to the academic course. This study provides explicit evidence for what has been, up to now, primarily a theoretical justification for reflection.


The past decade has witnessed tremendous growth in the service-learning field. As a relatively new pedagogy to higher education, the need to evaluate and interpret the outcomes and the impacts of service-learning has grown (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, and Kerrigan, 1996). The research to date focuses largely on philosophical reasons for utilizing service-learning (Jeavons, 1995), practical concerns for administrators and faculty in implementing service (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996), and student outcomes (Astin and Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, and Avalos, 1999; Cohen and Kinsey, 1994; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Giles and Eyler, 1994, Markus, Howard, and King, 1993; Sax, Astin, and Astin, 1996; Sax and Astin, 1997).

As proponents in the field attempt to institutionalize service-learning, it is vital that educators have some understanding of "good pedagogy." The research question guiding this study was: What role does reflection play in service-learning courses? The term "reflection" used in this study is defined by Brockbank and McGill (1998) as,

> First, the process or means by which an experience, in the form of thought, feeling or action, is brought into consideration, while it is happening or subsequently. Secondly, deriving from the first, the creation of meaning and conceptualization from experience and the potentiality to look at things as other than they are. (p. 56)

This study adds significantly to the research literature on the pedagogy of service-learning by providing direct, empirical evidence of the importance of reflection in service-learning. This study

provides some much needed information on the process - namely, "how" service enhances learning through reflection.

### *Method*

The study consisted of interviews with faculty who taught service-learning courses and students who had enrolled in service-learning courses. Fifteen faculty and seventy-two students from three different higher education institutions were interviewed between October 1998 and March 1999.

At each institution I identified several service-learning courses in a variety of disciplines. The faculty had all incorporated service-learning into their curricula, and the students had each taken a minimum of one service-learning course at their institution. The faculty (11 tenured and 4 non-tenured professors) represent a wide range of disciplines: Business, Economics, Education, English, Health Science, Psychology, Public Policy, Sociology, Spanish, and Speech Communication. The majority of the students interviewed for this study were juniors and seniors in college, although some freshmen and sophomores were interviewed as well. The sample of students consisted of 25 males and 47 females.

I interviewed five service-learning faculty and conducted a average of five focus group interviews at each institution. Through the faculty interviews I gathered information about the service-learning course design, classroom practices, and faculty's perception of student learning. Student interviews focused on how the students interpreted the service experience in relation to the course: the connections they saw between the academic course material they were studying and the community work/service work they were doing, the role that reflection played in the course and in their own personal and academic development, and what types of things they did in and out of class to help make connections between service and formal course content.

### *Data Analysis*

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), "qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data" (p. 111). Throughout this service-learning study I organized the data that I collected, identifying themes that emerged from the data and tested those themes. Specifically, in this study I strove to identify any themes that appeared to relate to the manner in which reflection was utilized in the course and how that utilization impacted student learning. Themes that emerged from the data formed the study's thesaurus:

> *Theme I: Connections Between Service Experience and Academic Course Material.* This theme includes faculty and students' perceptions about the connections made between the service experience and the academic course material such as course readings assignments, class discussions, and writing assignments.
>
> *Theme II: The Role of Reflection.* Students and faculty spoke frequently about the role of reflection in their service-learning courses. This theme included their comments on the importance of structured reflection, both written and oral.

### *Results*

One of the goals of this research is to identify how reflection can be used to integrate service with learning. The students and faculty who were interviewed in this study frequently mentioned structured reflection -- journal writing and group discussion -- as a strategy used to connect the service experience to the academic course material. The literature on service-learning indicates that reflection is an important component of service-learning; indeed, it is usually included in most definitions of service-learning, and there has even been a guidebook written to assist practitioners in conducting critical reflection in service-learning courses (Eyler, Giles, &Schmiede, 1996). Thus, it is not surprising that all of the faculty interviewed for this study cited reflection as their principal means of connecting service to the academic course material. In fact no other strategies were mentioned. Those faculty who mentioned journal writing or class discussion as a strategy for connecting the service experience to the academic course material, saw these as ways of engaging the students in reflection. Consequently, this section will discuss three main issues in relation to

reflection: 1) faculty and students' views on the overall importance of reflection, 2) different kinds of reflection strategies used, and 3) how faculty integrated reflection in their service-learning courses.

*The Overall Importance of Reflection*

Both faculty and students indicate that reflection is an important part of service-learning courses. As this student reports, reflection is an important component that makes a course a "service-learning" course: "The part that makes it service-learning, I think, is coming back to the classroom, after you've experienced it [service], and reflecting on it, and talking about it, and sharing your experience." This student felt that reflection enabled her to synthesize the knowledge gained from her experience outside the classroom and the "book knowledge" she learned inside the classroom. One student also felt that "the part of service-learning that's so important is reflection," because reflecting on the service meant that she was going to "gain something from it." The "something" that these students said they gained was a better understanding of how to ask questions about the readings for the course. Some students described this as being able to "critically analyze" the readings and other information that was being presented to them in the course, as well as in their service experiences.

These comments and assessments of the importance of reflection were echoed in the voices of the faculty. One professor felt that the students didn't realize the full impact of their service experience until after they reflected on what they had done and "processed the experience." A few professors expressed the opinion that the students won't necessarily make the connections between the course material and the service experience on their own. One faculty member shared her own experience in teaching a service-learning course where she did not incorporate reflection to facilitate the connection of service and the course material:

> I really believe that the service needs to be facilitated by the instructor to make that connection....It's reflected in my [course] evaluations....When I have incorporated

> service-learning into the classroom, my evaluations have skyrocketed. When I didn't do that, likewise the evaluations reflected it as well, unfortunately in the other direction. A lot of them would write "I thought this was a total waste of time, service-learning. I didn't really like it at all...Some people liked it because they have a volunteer spirit within them, but a lot of students didn't see the usefulness; they didn't understand why they were doing it. I think sometimes as faculty we assume, "reflection is there." We assume the students are gonna make the connections, because the reading is reflective.

A student who took two different service-learning courses -- one which incorporated reflection, and one that did not -- seemed to agree. She felt that the professor who did not incorporate reflection into the course had "no idea of what any of us were doing." She felt this lack of reflection prevented connections from being made between what they were experiencing with the service component and what they were learning in the classroom. By contrast, she described her positive experience in the service-learning course that incorporated reflection as follows: "We pulled everybody else's experiences into the class, which improved this class - content and quality - tremendously."

*Types of Reflection Utilized*

The students described engaging primarily in two types of reflection activities: class discussions facilitated by graduate coordinators or their course professors, and written reflection in the form of journals and papers. Overall, the students' comments about both types of reflection activities were glowingly positive.

Reflection that took place in the classroom setting with the entire class were particularly helpful to some students. They stated that they enjoyed hearing about what other students were doing at different service sites. These students reported that reflection assisted them in developing problem-solving skills that were applicable to a variety of different situations because it "helped us notice things that we might not have noticed, and to relate different experiences back and to see trends and things like that." One student said that he felt that reflection helped them deal with the problems that came up because they were able to see "how other people handle their problems," as

well as "get reassurance from other people." Several other students echoed this latter sentiment, describing how the classroom reflection sessions created a supportive environment where students could share their experiences, "good or bad:"

> We shared a lot of our experiences. We would sit down and say, "Okay, who had a very good or very bad experience this past week in your service site? What happened?" So not only did I get to experience at my site, but I got to learn about others' as well.

Again and again students spoke of how the opportunity to "exchange ideas and stories" was an important part of the service-learning course. One student in particular thought that hearing other students' experiences "made it a lot easier for a lot of us who were just starting service out for the first time." He said that it gave him encouragement because "knowing that other people were going through the same stages and the same frustrations, the same difficulties, made it much easier." He felt that it enabled the students to talk about their difficulties and "give each other suggestions about what to do." Other students felt that they learned more because they were learning not only from their own service experiences, but also from those of others. They described the different placements as "really bringing to life what we were studying." Students clearly felt that the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences about the service experience with their peers was one of the benefits of a service-learning course:

> Discussion is very helpful because we learned from other people's experiences. We get into discussions and we hear what other people face. In some of the other classes, I felt kind of isolated, like we didn't know - if we are in one site, we don't know what is happening in the other site.

Student comments about written reflection were also positive. Several students stated that writing in journals was helpful because it required them to think formally about connecting the course material, often the course readings, to the service experience. One student said that the "directed journal entries" were helpful because they "forced me to think about some aspect of what I was doing," something that he didn't feel he would have done on his own. Another student

described how "writing weekly diary entries" helped her to synthesize her ideas. She observed that some people "naturally reflect and enjoy doing that, but a lot of other people won't do it unless they're forced to." While some students described the written reflection as assisting them in understanding the relationship between the course material and the service experience, others felt it helped them to realize the impact the service experience had on them. Either way, most students felt that written reflection was "extremely important."

Some students felt that the journal writing provided an avenue where the graduate coordinator or the course professor could "oversee" what the students were doing at the service site. In this way, there would be some supervision of their activities and guidance would be provided to them if necessary. Thus, the students felt that the journal writing provided them with feedback that was slightly different than the type of feedback that the students gained from the class discussions with their peers.

*Examples of Integrating Reflection*

When asked, the faculty provided examples of the manner in which they incorporated reflection in their service-learning course. Several faculty indicated that class reflection was an integral part of the course. As one professor stated, "The secret for success for that particular class is because we didn't use the service-learning project as kind of an add-on." She would ask the students to bring the service environment into the class by asking them to reflect on how they could use the theories they had been reading about in the text, in their weekly activities at the service site. Another professor provided a similar example: "They spend a weekend at the Union Rescue Mission. They have to talk about what happened to them there, but they also have to refer to texts that they've read to help them understand their experiences." A professor who teaches a course titled *The Rhetoric of Service-learning* in the Speech Communications Department on her campus provided the following example from her course:

> We talked a lot about rhetorical theories and rhetorical constructions and we applied them to the situations they were experiencing, which were diverse....And what we did was, we'd say "Okay, how are all these experiences shaped? How for example, is the message of what this is...going on in this environment? How is that conveyed to the public? How does this message get out?" And then I asked them to pick...a song that you think envisions what it is that this course...that your experiences, service, is about. Then we would take that song and deconstruct it and.... So instead of just deconstructing a song and saying what metaphors are in the song, what we did in this class was we said how are these metaphors reflecting what you're experiencing in your service-learning experience? So it became so much more tangible because instead of just being an exercise in metaphorical deconstruction, it became an exercise of "Wow! You mean this metaphor affects the way I experience my service-learning experience?."..I always used their service-learning experiences as a point - a jumping point for their reflections in class.

Some professors stated that they used written reflection because they felt that the service experiences were generating a lot of emotional and personal growth in the students. One professor said that in his class he really "encourages students who may be challenging their own thoughts about groups of our society, and to really be open at least to themselves, as they think about them and maybe addressing some of the biases or the thoughts they've had about different people." He then described how he tries to assist the students to reflect in a more private manner:

> There are some other informal activities like doing logs and submitting logs where they have an opportunity to also reflect, maybe more personally than in a group setting. I think for a lot of our students, the emotional growth and the emotional aspects of the experience perhaps are too personal to really express.

Another professor described utilizing a similar technique - having the students first write their reflections, and then encouraging them to bring it into the class discussion reflection sessions:

> They start writing about it [service experience] in their journals...So I have them do that a couple of times before they open up so that it's a closed venue - I'm exploring how they're feeling - I make comments, turn them back long before we ever have a class discussion. Like, "This is a really good point. Bring this up in class when we talk about it." It gives them a safety feature as well.

Most faculty mentioned that they used a combination of individual written reflection and group discussion reflection in their classes. They described incorporating reflection into their daily classroom encounters by asking students, "okay, you're volunteering here, make a connection for



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me to your organization." Several professors also spoke of having the students write a "summary" or "final" paper at the end of the term where students had to reflect on their experiences. As one professor observes:

> So they have to step back at the end of the semester and not only say, what is this - or what does this service organization look like? What happened to me? What did I learn, in the process of the course?

Faculty and students both felt quite strongly that reflection is a vital component of service-learning courses.

## *Discussion*

When this research study was first proposed, college and university administrators, faculty, researchers, and even service-learning practitioners were calling for more evidence of service-learning's effectiveness. At service-learning conferences, I repeatedly heard pleas for studies that would inform practice, demonstrate the academic legitimacy of service-learning, and identify strategies for ensuring positive service-learning outcomes. Although early service-learning studies had documented a wide range of positive personal, attitudinal, social and cognitive outcomes, there was a lack of research documenting ***how*** the service-learning experience produced such outcomes. Thus, this study was designed to shed some light on the process whereby service-learning facilitates learning, focusing specifically on the role of reflection.

### *Connecting Service and Learning*

All of the faculty in this study recognized the importance of connecting the service experience to the academic course material. However, many of them believed that the students did not or would not make these connections independently. These professors provided examples of how they deliberately brought the service experience into the class discussions or asked the students to do so in their written course assignments.

Students at all three institutions suggested that the opportunity to see the concepts from the academic course material illustrated in the service experience helped them to connect one to the other. They reported that they were better able to make sense of the complex theories or abstract ideas they were learning in class by applying them to real life situations.

Research shows that active student involvement in the learning process tends to be a more effective method of instruction than more traditional methods such as lecturing (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994). In contrast to lecture/discussion classes, where students tend to take on passive roles, service-learning courses require active student involvement and participation in the teaching-learning process. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) extensive review of research on the effects of college on students indicates that individualized and collaborative teaching methods lead to greater gains in academic content and skills because students take greater responsibility for their own learning. Again, this is not surprising, given extensive evidence on the power of student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984, 1993).

*Reflection as a Pedagogical Tool*

While reflection has been regularly advocated by proponents of service-learning as a critical element in effective service-learning, this study provides explicit support for what has been, up to now, primarily a theoretical justification for reflection. In other words, this study clearly supports the contention that reflection plays a central role in the process of learning through service-learning courses (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1996; Waterman, 1997). Students who were interviewed indicated that they valued both written *and* oral reflection as means of enhancing their service-learning experiences. Waterman (1997) suggests that "both personal development and academic learning can be furthered using either oral or written reflection activities" (p. 8). In *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning*, Eyler et al. (1996), identified four modes of reflection -- reading, writing, doing, telling-- that were most useful for attaining different outcomes

such as connecting to others, citizen development, understanding of issues and subject matter, applying knowledge and skills, and reframing thinking about complex social issues.

### *Implications*

*How do these findings inform the field of service-learning?*

In their 1998 article titled, *A Service-learning Research Agenda for the Next Five Years*, Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler listed the top ten unanswered questions in service-learning research. The first question on the list was "How can service-learning enhance subject matter learning?" (p. 65). This study adds to the limited research literature (Giles and Eyler, 1998) that has attempted to address this question.

This study's findings reinforce the important role that reflection plays in enhancing learning by connecting the course material to the service experience. Reflection provides "the transformative link between the action of serving and the ideas and understanding of learning" (Eyler et al., 1996, p. 14). Indeed, students and faculty in this study noted the importance of reflection in service-learning courses as a means of understanding how the service experience is related to the academic course material. The important role that reflection plays in the learning process is not new. Dewey's (1916) writings about experiential learning in the first quarter of the last century identified reflection as the key to learning from experience (Siegel and Rockwood, 1993). It is important that faculty, as the ones held responsible for student learning, understand the importance of including a reflection component in their service-learning courses.

The findings also underscore the importance of the reciprocal nature of "academics" and "service" where the quality of service is enhanced by directly applying the academic course material to the service experience, and where learning is enhanced by drawing on the service experience to understand the course content. That these two basic components of service-learning are mutually enhancing is articulated in the preamble to the *Principles of Good Practice in*

*Combining Service and Learning*: "Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (Kendall, 1991, p. 95). And as faculty in this study indicated, it is important that the students not perceive the service experience as an "add-on" requirement for the course. At the same time, faculty need to recognize the importance of helping students understand the relevance of the service experience to the course, as well as the applicability of the academic course.

*How do these findings inform higher education?*

Many observers believe that the way we think about teaching and learning in higher education is changing (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Baxter Magolda and Terenzini, 1999; Boggs, 1999; Cross, 1996; Guskin, 1997; Hutchings, 1996; Major, 1999; Palmer, 1997; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994). Barr and Tagg (1995) identify this change in thinking as a "paradigm shift":

> In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. (p. 12)

Guskin (1997) calls for a shift in focus from "how faculty teach" to "how students learn" (p. 6). He sees this as a way to create a learning environment that focuses directly on those activities that enhance student learning. There is increasing speculation about the true value of the primary learning environment of undergraduate students: the passive lecture-discussion format where faculty talk and most students listen (Guskin, 1997; Palmer, 1997; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994; Warren, 1997). Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) identify lecturing as an undergraduate educational myth that may actually impede the improvement of teaching and learning. They claim that "individualized and collaborative approaches to instruction are more effective because they respond better to differences in students, levels of preparation, learning styles and rates" (p. 29).

In exploring how learning occurs in service-learning courses, this study supports a shift in focus from teaching to learning. As educators, administrators, and even society begins to rethink what learning is in college, this study provides evidence that students valued their service-learning

experience because it involved more than the mere acquisition of facts. Students thus felt challenged both affectively and cognitively in their service-learning courses because they were given an opportunity to apply what they were reading to a real life experience which, in turn, stimulated them to examine and reflect on not only the readings itself but also their own personal values and beliefs.

Cognitive research about the nature of learning informs us that students construct their own knowledge, that they benefit from working collaboratively, and that they do not all learn in the same way (Baxter Magolda, 1996; Major, 1999). Other research indicates that "students learn in a multitude of settings and in a variety of ways: intellectually, emotionally, physically, and simultaneously" (Fried, 1999, p. 10). Indeed, students don't compartmentalize their lives; rather they live complex lives – "an interconnected web of varied experiences" (Magolda, 1997, p. 16). Service-learning provides an avenue to connect students' living with their learning. Rather than allowing students to leave their emotions, opinions, and personal experiences at the classroom door, students are asked to reflect on their experiences in relation to the academic course material. Students in this study recognized the interconnectedness of service-learning. They saw their service activities as lived experiences that were interwoven with their academic experiences.

This study provides information on more than just the processes (application of course concepts to service experiences and reflection about the application) by which students acquire new knowledge and skills. The study also contributes to the current efforts to reconceptualize learning outcomes and processes by showing how students make sense of the new ideas, attitudes, people, and experiences that they are encountering through the service experience.

As this study and others illustrate, the learning process is both cognitive and affective. When students in this study reflected on and identified their learning outcomes, their comments were strongly linked to personal, and occasionally, emotional experiences they had at their service

sites. Faculty and students spoke excitedly about the interconnectedness of the course and the service experience.

Service-learning provides students with the opportunity to eliminate the false dichotomy between cognitive learning and personal development (Baxter Magolda, 1996). In fact, service-learning offers the opportunity to create what George Kuh (1996) describes as a "seamless learning environment":

> The word seamless suggests that what was once believed to be separate, distinct parts (e.g., in-class and out-of-class, academic and non-academic; curricular and cocurricular, or on-campus and off-campus experiences) are now of one piece, bound together so as to appear whole or continuous. In seamless learning environments, students are encouraged to take advantage of learning resources that exist both inside and outside of the classroom...students are asked to use their life experiences to make meaning of material introduced in classes....(p. 136)

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Overall, the students and faculty who participated in this study were supporters of service-learning. The majority of students were enthusiastic and positive about their service-learning experiences. It is important to keep in mind that students who had had a less-than-positive experience with service-learning most likely would not have taken the time to attend a focus group interview. Thus, these results may be biased if I spoke only to people who were enthusiastic advocates of service-learning and if there were less satisfied students who declined to participate.

In 1998, Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler wrote an article assessing the progress that has been made in answering important research questions that had been identified by a gathering of researchers, faculty, program directors, students, foundation executives, government officials, and national association representatives at the 1991 Wingspread Conference. Although definite inroads have been made to answer the various questions posed, more work lies ahead.

Specifically, future research needs to utilize a variety of methodological approaches to shed further light on the efficacy of service-learning in producing its intended outcomes. As Shumer



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(1997) states: "Unlike traditional educational programs, where curricula tend to be fixed, the methods of instruction controlled, and the expected outcomes predictable, service-learning is anything but fixed, controllable and predictable" (p. 79). Indeed, the different aspects of the service-learning experience (i.e. number of hours of service, type of service placement, academic discipline and course structure, type of reflection activities, etc.) need to be systematically assessed to gain a clearer understanding of their influence on the outcomes. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies that control for these different service-learning contexts would help to inform service-learning practices.

Longitudinal studies are also needed to determine long-term effects of service-learning on outcomes such as future service participation after college, self-efficacy, life-long learning, and career development. Furthermore, developmental outcomes such as changes in identity and changes in values and beliefs, which often translate to changes in behavior, may take longer to achieve and thus would show up only in long-term longitudinal studies.

Since observational studies are helpful in discovering how a process operates, they would be helpful in providing further information on how service enhances learning in different contexts. Given that service-learning takes place in a variety of disciplines and settings, while striving to attain different goals – enhancing achievement, strengthening civic responsibility, developing leadership skills, creating community partnerships, to name a few -- observational studies would assist us in understanding the significance of disciplinary and contextual variations in terms of learning outcomes.

Eyler and Giles (1999) recommend taking a multi-method approach to service-learning research in an attempt to measure the multiple outcomes of multiple service-learning programs. They state: "We must understand the relationship among the various elements of the design and outcomes of service-learning in its short-term and long-term effects and to integrate research and

practice" (p. 70). In much the same way that service-learning has attempted to integrate community service and traditional classroom learning, so must we be more effective in synthesizing research and practice. In the spirit of "action research" (Argyris, 1997; Schon, 1995), research should continue to inform practice, and practice continue to shape the design and direction of research.

### *Conclusion*

This study adds to the somewhat limited research literature to date that attempts to provide information about the process of service-learning. A key pedagogical tool to effective service-learning practice is creating ***intentional, structured reflection*** opportunities. These reflection experiences provide students with an avenue to discuss their achievements, challenges, the connection between the service experience and the academic course material, and offers the opportunity for students to gain feedback from the course instructor and from each other.

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